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Son of My ... ?

Meghan Henning
Denison University

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[16] Then they journeyed from Bethel; and when they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel was in childbirth, and she had hard labor. [17]When she was in her hard labor, the midwife said to her, 'Do not be afraid; for now you will have another son.' [18]As her soul was departing (for she died), she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin

Genesis 35:16-18.

I. Introduction: What's in a Name?

Rachel, the beloved matriarch of Israel names her son Ben-oni, only to have his name changed a moment later by his father. Does this act reveal something more than what meets the eye? Is Jacob usurping the naming rights of the mother, grappling for power in a tribal culture? Few theologians or Biblical scholars have given much thought to this passage. However, the interaction, or lack thereof between Rachel and Jacob seems strange. In the previous birth narratives in Genesis the mothers have done the naming, signifying that mothers and midwives did all the naming in this tribal culture. Rachel's name for her son, "Ben-oni" carries a much different meaning from the one that Jacob later chose for him. Ben-oni means "son of my sorrow," or "son of my suffering," which is thought to be a reference to Rachel's immanent death. In contrast, "Ben Yamin," or "Benjamin" the name chosen by Jacob, means "son of my right hand" or "son of the south." These names seem to have opposite meanings, representing a serious disagreement on the part of these two parents, as well as an anomaly in the naming tradition (whereby the mother chooses a name which is not changed unless by God). "Benyamin" was the name used for the rest of the child's life, and was the name used for the tribe of his descendents. "Ben-oni" was never mentioned again (Haber, 132). Perhaps then, Jacob, in changing the name of his son does not merely change a syllable, but something far more significant and consequential.

After all, naming is a central component of the human experience. The name itself has power, communicating something crucial about that which is

named. A person's name is closely connected to her identity and her actions. The name itself is powerful then, "because [it] both participate[s] in the reality named and give[s] definition and identity to that reality" ("Names and Naming," 300). The name gives expression to the human experience, assigned as adjectives that describe the discrete content of a person, place, or thing. From plants to gods, naming defines relationships for humanity. In relationship to a deity, naming is crucial, communicating the experienced will and power of the god or goddess (Van DerLeeuw, 147-149). For example, names of God in the Hebrew tradition reflect God's actions ("Names and Naming," 301). Prayer then is a powerful illustration of the power and will of human words (Van DerLeeuw, 422). The language that humans assign to experienced phenomena wields power. In the case of a person, the name is like a mirror image, a window to the essence of the soul. Similarly, "the rite of naming is equivalent to bestowing a soul" (Van DerLeeuw, 287).

II. Hebrew Proper Names

The Hebrew tradition exemplifies the power of naming. In the pre-exilic period, all of the names given to children had very specific meanings (after the exile family names are used). The name was considered to be highly significant, the expression of the soul or a person's "intrinsic significance" ("Name," 503-505). From the psychological standpoint of the Israelite, "soul" means a great deal more than just the "inner man" or ego (Pederson, 254). The soul encompasses "everything that fills it, the renown, the property, in everything wherein it works" (Pederson, 254). Consequently, naming wields power not only over an individual, but that individual's life and all that she encounters. Naming is integrally connected with creation. Naming children is parallel to God's creation and the naming of the universe (Genesis 1:1-10, Teubal, 40). By naming someone or something, as Adam did in the Garden of Eden, a person defines the substance and function of that person or thing. Thus, Hebrew people were concerned with choosing names for their children, which were attached to "good forces," as the name has the power to make the bearer conform (Pederson, 252, "Name," 501). All of a person's thoughts and actions are driven by the "essential nature" assigned to him through his name ("Name," 501).

The Hebrew proper name itself often has a lot to do with its origin (circumstances at birth, physical characteristics etc.) ("Name," 503-505). For instance, Esau is named "Esau" because of his appearance at birth, "hairy." When God

changes a name, something new is communicated about the person's destiny. In Genesis 17, Abram and Sarai are given a new destiny when their names are changed. Abraham and Sarah illustrate that a name change is revelation (Flieshman, 19). Through their narrative, the reader can see that for the Hebrew people the name is an indicator of God's plan for human lives. The name itself doesn't hold the power, but the human value assigned to that name gives it power (Flieshman, 32). Since names are interpreted as God's will or human destiny, the act of naming is powerful and full of hidden meaning for today's reader. The names in Genesis for instance, often carry a meaning that was readily recognized by the story's first hearers (Hess, 1998, 187-188). These names also help modern readers to put the stories in a particular time period. The names in Genesis 12-50 all use the "y form in Amorite personal names," dating these names in the early second millennium (Hess, 1998, 180-181). Extra Biblical sources such as clay ostraca (broken pieces of inscribed pottery) and bullae (signet rings/and or their impressions) from Israel and Judah have corroborated this conclusion (Schoville, 59). The majority of the names from these archeological findings have reference to "the God of Israel and his attributes" (Schoville, 60). However, some of the names have origins in pagan religion, revealing an overlap between Hebrew and outside influences indicative of the second millennium. "Ben-oni" and "Benyamin" are two names that reflect these outside influences, likely to indicate that the mother, Rachel was a Syrian (Gray, 71).

In the Hebrew Bible proper names also provide contextual information through their form. Some names are considered "theophoric propositional/ compound names," which consist of more than one element. For instance Nathanael, or "God has given," is a sentence or complete thought ("Names," 1924, 156-157). Like Nathanael, compound names typically communicate that God has created the child and that God has acted (granted, helped, rescued, given grace, healed etc.) or is going to act on this child in some specific way ("Names," 1972, 803-804). In contrast, another class of names "simple/ epithetic names" do not have direct religious significance or theophoric elements ("Names," 1924, 157-160, "Names," 1972, 803-805). These types of names usually have something to do with the physical characteristics of the bearer, the circumstances at the bearer's birth or his function within the family ("Names," 1924, 158, "Names," 1972, 805). For instance, "Ahab," "father's brother," is an incomplete thought, merely revealing his relationship to the family ("Names, 1972, 806). "Ben-oni" and "Benyamin" both fit into the

"simple/epithetic" class of names, as neither name is a reference to God in any way. Rachel gives her son a name that seems to reflect the circumstances of his difficult birth, "son of my suffering." Similarly, when Jacob changes the name to "son of my right hand, Benyamin" he does not give his son a commission in life or a connection to the Divine. Instead, "Benyamin" infers the position that his son would hold in the family ("Name," 503-505). The verbal formula used to name Benyamin in this passage is also the same as the formula used to name Dinah. In both cases, no reasons are given for the names except those inferred from the story. Thus, with these simple names, the humans doing the naming seem to assume that God determines the character of the individual and humans just observe these characteristics in naming. Thus, simple names do not so much reflect an act of power for these people, as a subjective observation (Ramsey, 28-33).

Simply examining the form of the two different names found in Genesis 35:18 sheds light on the exchange between mother and father in this birth/death narrative. In fact, many Bible translators have debated over the issue of Hebrew proper names for this reason: many passages of the Hebrew Bible "become more meaningful once the meanings of Hebrew names are known" (Omanson, 109). In most renderings of the Biblical texts the names are transliterated or transcribed rather than translated. In transcription the word is rendered by replacing each letter of the Hebrew alphabet with a corresponding letter in the translator's language. Transliteration means that each syllable of the name is transferred to the corresponding syllable of the translator's language, adjusting for differences in letter sounds or diphthongs, so that anyone reading the word can easily pronounce it (Reyburn, 416-417). Both of these options, though relied upon heavily, do not communicate the meaning imbued by those who are doing the naming in the text. When names are translated, however, the fullest meaning of the name itself is communicated, indicating the "significance of the unique event associated with the name" (Reyburn, 418-419). Therefore, the significance of Genesis 35:16-18 cannot be determined without giving close attention to the fullest meaning of "Ben-oni" and "Benyamin." When translated, the very specific contrast between Ben-oni and Benyamin is revealed (Reyburn, 419). These names could reveal the contrast between Rachel's perspective on the birth of her son, and Jacob's, a final poetic flourish to the Rachel narrative. And yet, the meanings of these names are usually inserted as a footnote to most modern translations. Thus, the remainder of this paper will seek to redefine the significance of Rachel's son in this

narrative, restoring his name.

III. Birthing and Matriarchal Naming Rites

For many authors who share feminist concerns, this text is a dramatic representation of the tension between Israelite Matriarchal (tribal) roots, and Patriarchal (monarchial) development. On the whole, naming in the Biblical tradition is the mother's prerogative. Teubal cites that there are "27 cases of female name-givers to 17 male, and 18 maternal naming speeches to 8 paternal ones" (40). However, these numbers do not accurately portray the social reality of Ancient Israel. The Biblical authors likely tried to "conceal" the matriarchal aspects of naming in order to fabricate a patriarchal history (Teubal, 40). For instance, the Rebekkah and Tamar narratives are both told in such a way as to mask the women's naming role. The authors of these stories use the passive tense, saying things like "the child was named…" The authors of the Hebrew Bible either omit the midwives, or their crucial role in birthing and naming is downplayed. Additionally, the authors of these birth narratives always mention the father immediately after the name is given or incidentally somewhere in the birth narrative in order to insinuate that the father is in close proximity and involved during the birth (Teubal, 40-41). More than likely, these fathers were not this involved in the birthing of their children.

Instead, the mother and the midwife gave the names at the instant of birth, a "relic of a primitive matriarchate" (Teubal, 41, "Name," 503-505). This is apparent in the narratives of Rebekkah, Rachel, Leah and Tamar, in which the mothers assign names to their children based on the circumstances at birth or experience of the birth itself (Teubal, 41). In the cases of twins, (both Rebekkah and Tamar had twins) the mothers are concerned with which child is the youngest, attaching a crimson thread to the foot of the oldest baby during birth. The color crimson suggests roughness and violence, a trait that is rejected by matriarchal "queen mothers" in favor of the more "civilized" youngest heirs (Teubal, 41). Throughout the Biblical tradition, there is an allusion to this matriarchal tradition, whereby the women are to blame when the youngest son is "chosen" as the heir (i.e. Sarah, Rebekkah, Bath-Sheba) (Teubal, 41).

Similarly, Phyllis Trible has attempted to "redeem" the patriarchal influences on the Hebrew Bible, looking to the grammar of the text. In Genesis chapter 2, she notes that with regard to naming, there are two sets of verbal forms. In Genesis 2:19, the earth creature "names" the animals (using the noun sem), but in 2:23, Adam "calls" his wife "Woman" (using the verb qara;

Trible, 92-100, Ramsey, 25-26). In 2:23, then, Adam is not exerting power over Eve, but "rejoicing in their mutuality" (Trible, 100, Ramsey, 26). This is significant to the examination of Genesis 35:18 because according to this formula, Rachel "names" Ben-oni (using the noun sem) and Jacob "calls" him Benyamin (Ramsey, 29). Perhaps Jacob is not usurping Rachel's official naming power, but taking a proactive role in his child's life, giving him a name that is not as harsh by which he can be "called."

Yet one other grammatical note can further illuminate Genesis 35:16-18. In Genesis 35:17, the midwife says to Rachel, "Do not fear; you will have this son also" (Genesis 35:17b, KJV). This language is a mistranslation, putting the midwife's words in the future tense. This mistake in translation has just been discovered in the twentieth century, revealing that her words are actually to be written in the present tense: "Don't be afraid, for you have another son" (Genesis 35:17b, NIV). As Blondheim observes, the present tense verb indicates that the midwife knew the gender of the baby before it was born. That is, Benyamin was a breech birth, in which the baby is positioned feet first rather than head first (Blondheim, 16-18). A breech birth is very difficult, and excruciatingly painful for the mother, perhaps accounting for Rachel's choosing of "Ben-oni," "son of my suffering." Thus, the midwife's words are a comfort to Rachel in her death, informing her that God had answered her prayer for another son (she prayed for this when Joseph was born; Sarna, 243). Similarly, Gray, in his very early work on Hebrew proper names, suggested that "Ben-oni" is an after growth of the legend that Benyamin's birth killed Rachel (Gray, 71). If this is the case, then the inclusion of this name in the text portrays "Ben-oni" as a Syrian name, intentionally chosen by Rachel to reflect her Syrian perspective on the tragic circumstances of the child's birth.

IV. The Overall Context of Rachel's Lament

Further investigation into the Rachel narrative reveals that Rachel and Jacob's naming battle goes beyond the circumstances of a breech birth. Rather, this vignette is part of a larger narrative in the pre-history of Israel. Rachel dies after fulfilling her procreative role. Like Sarah, the writer and the culture singled out Rachel because of her barrenness (Steinberg, 83,112). In their civilization these women were at a disadvantage in their husband's homes. In the Hebrew Bible barren women are singled out through the mention of specific burial details, whereas fertile women (Rebekkah and Leah) are given no mention when they die (Steinberg, 83, 112). Rachel was the true exemplar of a barren woman

whose yearnings had been fulfilled by God. Her death is fitting, since her "desire for a child consumes her life" (Coats qtd. in Jeansonne, 137).

Consequently, "Ben-oni" should be understood as an expression of Rachel's exile in her husband's house. Unlike her husband Jacob, Rachel's ambitions drive her to total despair. In Genesis 30:1 Rachel cries out "give me children or else I die." Her death in 35:18 is an ironic fulfillment of that epithet (Pardes, 71-74). Throughout the power struggle between Rachel and Leah, each child is named in a way that reflects the rivalry. Leah's first four sons are named Reuben, "See a son," Simeon, "Because the Lord heard that I was hated," Levi, "Now this time my husband will be joined unto me," and Judah, "to give thanks to the Lord" (Haber, 131). Rachel, giving her maid to Jacob names her first two sons Dan, "God has judged me [in my rivalry with my sister] and given me a son," and Naphatali, "I have wrestled with my sister and prevailed" (Haber, 131). This trend carries on through all twelve of Jacob's sons. When Rachel bore a child of her own, she named him Joseph, "taken away/will add," reflecting that God had taken away her barrenness and her hopes for another son (Haber, 132). Thus, this push and pull in the Rachel/Leah narrative cycle drives the story up to this point (Gen. 35:16-18), driving both Rachel and Leah to extreme measures.

The location of this birth is also significant. Rachel gives birth to Benyamin in the Southern territory of the land of Canaan (later to be known as Judah), and Jacob erects a monument to her there (Jeansonne, 85). Verse 16 says that they were "some distance" away from Ephrath. The only other place in the Hebrew Bible where this language is used is in 2Kings 5:19, where it is used to indicate a distance that is short enough for a runner to catch up with a chariot that is on the move. Thus, Jacob and his family are just at the edge of Ephrath when this story takes place (Sarna, 243). Dying on the edge of Ephrath (Bethlehem), Rachel makes it to the threshold of the royal city but can't enter. First exiled as a barren woman, Rachel's death is symbolic. The Davidic dynasty comes from Leah's (her rival) fourth son (Alter, 123). In this way Rachel's death "encapsulates her unfulfilled yearnings, her tragic exile" (Pardes, 71). Rachel's death ends the Rachel/Leah cycle. The Rachel/Leah narrative begins with Rachel and ends with her death (Leah's death isn't mentioned) (Jeansonne, 85). Ironically, Rachel, not Leah emerges as the voice of the exiled, the favorite matriarch in the Jewish tradition. This is made clear not only in Rachel's death but in Jeremiah 31:15-17: "A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children

are no more" (NIV).

The Rachel/Leah cycle is also unique because it is not concerned with lineal/vertical heirship, but rather a more horizontal/segmented genealogy. That is, the inheritance is not passed on through one "chosen" heir, but a whole family/clan takes on segments of the inheritance. The cycle itself testifies to the fact that multiple heirship comes at the expense of individual gain (Steinberg, 116-117). In fact, the form critical analysis of Genesis has revealed that Genesis 35:16-18 is likely written by "E." The writer's inclusion of the two names for Benyamin is his way of preserving patrilineal descent (descent through the father; Jay, 55, 67-68). Typically, the writer, "E" does not tolerate "bilateral" descent, but tries to correct the tension sacrificially. Bilateral descent refers to the embrace of both matrilineal tradition and a patrilineal one. In Genesis 35:16-18, the narrator (E) attempts to ameliorate the tension between patrilineal and matrilineal descent, allowing for Benyamin (the youngest, a matrilineal tradition) to receive the blessing at his father's behest (a patrilineal tradition) (Jay, 55, 67-68). All of this occurs through the sacrifice of Rachel's life, understood as the consequence for her earlier theft from her father's house (Genesis 31:32, "But if you find anyone who has your gods, he shall not live). Jacob's response, then, to Rachel's death and choice of a name, should be understood within the context of multiple heirship and bilateral descent, introduced as new concepts in the Jacob/Rachel/Leah narrative. The struggle for control of a line of descent drives each of the main characters to act in this narrative, resulting in the bizarre name changing scene in Genesis 35:16-18.

There are two possible interpretations of Jacob's response. One, Jacob may have wanted to protect his son from the fate associated with such a gloomy name, naming him according to his aspirations for the child. Thus, Jacob changed the name merely to "avert the evil omen" ("Benjamin, 1902, Pardes, 72, "Name," 503-505). Or, Jacob was reassuring his beloved wife that Beyamin, the youngest will receive the blessing. "Son of my right hand, or Son of the South," is a possible contrast to the West Semitic tribes, indicating that the legacy of Benjamin was South of Joseph's (Pardes, 72). Thus, Jacob is intervening in the matriarchal power struggle between Rachel and Leah, providing hope for Rachel. Jacob renaming his son should be interpreted as a sign of hope, alleviating the tension in a system of multiple heirship and bilateral descent. This act is an expression of his love for her and his son (Jeansonne, 85).

V. Conclusions

While the act of naming may seem insignificant to the modern reader, the discussion of Genesis 35:16-18 proves otherwise. Naming is a sociological and theological phenomenon whereby humans define the world around them. Naming gives new meaning to these three short verses when looking to the Hebrew traditions and the fullest translation of the names in Genesis 35:18. Rachel, surveys her circumstances as Syrian woman, struggling for recognition in her husband's home. Worn out from the battle with her sister Leah, Rachel finally gives birth to her second son just as she arrives on the cusp of the City of David. Her choice of "son of my suffering," or "Ben-oni" reflects both her immanent death and her surrender to the circumstances of her lifelong struggle: exile in her husband's home, and the fierce competition of multiple hiership. Ironically, Rachel dies with this knowledge that she has born a second son, the rightful matrilineal hier. Jacob's actions in verse 18, then are not intended to usurp Rachel's power. Rather, he suggests that his son will be "called" "son of my right hand," or "Benyamin," informing his beloved Rachel that through her sacrificial death she has gained victory. In this dramatic depiction of her exile, Rachel is comforted by her husband, by the power of the name.

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